Open City Network

Briefing: A City-First Approach to Smart Cities

Fall 2019

Certain layers of the smart city must be built and maintained in the public interest. Doing so will drive government innovation and unlock new data-driven forms of economic, social and democratic good.

Technology has collided with democracy in Canada

Tech has outpaced the ability of our cities to put strong policy and governance around it. As cities increasingly deploy connected, data-gathering infrastructure, they risk outsourcing the public domain to large vendors, selling closed systems that encroach on public control and governance of our infrastructure and the data it generates.

Cities are cash strapped and seeking ways to fund their modernization. They are under significant pressure to evolve, but we have not equipped them with the tools, funding, or policy and governance frameworks to do so responsibly. The risk is not that we'll stop having local elections. Rather, it's that we'll see a slow erosion of the capacity, effectiveness and moral authority of our cities to fulfil the mandate we've given them, while inserting private sector actors as an ungovernable layer within city operations. For our cities to successfully navigate this challenging smart city moment, urgent work is required at the intersection of technology and public policy.

Most importantly, we must reframe how we expect to build the digital architecture, standards and protocols that will underpin smart cities in Canada. These layers of the smart city must be built and maintained in the public interest. Doing so will drive government innovation and unlock new data-driven forms of economic, social and democratic good.

A city-first approach to smart cities

The Open City Network's city-first approach calls for:

- Open architecture as our technological foundation;
- The value of public data to remain in public hands;
- Modernized regulations for smart cities that tilt strongly towards the public interest;
- Investments in the digital and cultural modernization our local democratic institutions.

Building digital public infrastructure (DPI)

Smart cities are currently being built by a patchwork of large and small private sector vendors, with no systematic emphasis on open architecture, interoperability, public governance or on protecting the value of public data. We must reframe smart cities as a major public works project, built in the public interest by a careful blend of public, private and NGO actors. The Open City Network's largest workstream is to build digital public infrastructure in this manner: with the business models and incentives that would typically accrue maximum value to the private sector amended to ensure that our city institutions emerge stronger, not weaker, from this "smart city" moment.

A focus on governance, policy and regulation

Technology usually leaves the public sector in a state of perpetual catch up on the policy and regulatory front. By working closely with the public and private sectors, the OCN will build and deploy digital public infrastructure more harmoniously between all parties, allowing government to build strong governance, regulatory and policy foundations to underpin smart city architecture, standards and protocols.

Fall 2019 consultations

The OCN has two consultations planned for Fall 2019:

1. Digital Public Infrastructure
    Members + Select Stakeholders - In Person (Remote Video Access Available) - Date/Location TBD

    Description: Honing use cases and scale up plans for first DPI platform

2. Policy and Regulatory Modernization
    Members Only - Online Consultation - Launching Fall 2019

    Description: What municipal, provincial and federal policy/regulatory changes are required to enable building DPI and to create strong smart city guardrails in Canada?

OCN membership

The OCN welcomes cities and other public sector organizations, as well as relevant private entities, NGOs or select individuals into its membership. It is also building strategic partnerships across these sectors to advance the agenda outlined above.

OCN governance

The founding members of the OCN Board of Directors are [Miovision](), [ESRI Canada](), [Geotab]() and [Mappedin](), with start up support from [Compute Ontario](), a not-for-profit funded by Ontario's [Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade](). We also have three board seats reserved for public sector organizations, which have been filled and will be announced soon.

OCN staff

The Executive Director of the Open City Network is Andy Best ([abest@theopencity.org]()).